

## Vision in Sight

### The Museum Photographs of Thomas Struth and the Photographic Tableau

As indicated by the sub-title, the focus of the thesis is double-layered or bifocal. In the close-up view I analyze the pictures known as *Museum Photographs* of the photographer Thomas Struth, which were made in museum interiors and sacral venues of beholding pictures (1989-2005). The *Museum Photographs* mark a major shift in scale in Struth's career both in terms of the theme resonating with polyphony and format. In the long shot view, from a historical perspective, the thesis traces the development of the photographic *tableau*, a type of photographic *picture-object* evolving in the art world from the end of the 1970s. I regard the photographic tableau to be as an "*open form*", a *dialect* of photographic art; its diversity is shaped by the different artistic processes. The appearance of the autonomous photographic picture (the Big Still Picture) from the very end of the seventies onward marks the photographic representation's emerging autonomy. In this process, artists working in the medium of photography integrate the methodical elements of different artistic practices and pictorial media in individually varied forms and scales. Their work is characterized by an intermedial approach, and photography is the medium of intermediality in their practices. The individual creative processes reveal varying degrees of awareness of the cinematic language, film visualization, performance and sculptural design, as well as ambitions towards the tradition of painting namely the Western Picture ideal.

From a theoretical point of view, the question of the emancipation of photographic representation is tied to an emphasis on the scientific aspects of photography. This is related to the research of the picture format arising from the material conjunction of documentarist photographic process and its photographed "subject matter". Namely: from a strictly objective documentarist approach a becoming photograph is a par excellence intermedial, an in-between object, another "reality" emancipated from the empirical surrounding. The scientific interest is also manifested, in the research of photography-based visual culture and the function of perception within the conceptual framework of semiotics and psychoanalysis.

I am studying the developing autonomy of the photographic representation through the artistic process of Thomas Struth. In Struth's documentarist approach, the presence of the camera is resolutely articulated. The camera's function is *adapted* in his artistic process, and the active role of the photographed "subject matter" is visible. Specifically in his museum works the viewers' interactions between and with the old paintings and architectural environment in the view (and in

the visible presence) of the camera together perform the photographed moment bringing on *auto-poetic* coincidences in the Museum Photographs. The photographs reflect the process of their own realization. In this creative process the unyielding view of the camera – dispersed in space however precisely positioned – carries a positive sign: it has more of a forming and preserving function than a threatening one (it is not the apparatus of surveillance or personal captures). Therefore the title refers not only to Struth's vision, his desire of sustaining for a while the incessant processes of change and to his melancholic (while joyful) resistance through documentary photography, but – in a metaphorical sense – also to the operation of the camera rendered visible in his photographs and adapted into the artistic process. In my thesis I rely on the conceptual framework of the Hungarian *Ferenc Méri*, the psychologist exploring dynamic socio-psychology, and of *Gábor Bódy*, cinematographer whose innovations in cinematography were inspired by the dynamic paradigm of semiotics. Such concepts include the term of *implied knowledge* in “dream-language” and the *rhetoric figures* identified in the syntax and semantic of *the manifest content* in dreams (dream-language) and photo-based filmic imagery, and *situationist*, *escalatory* and *analytical* use of the documentarist methods.

In Struth's statements, a German past burdened with tension and suppression is a re-occurring theme. I therefore dedicate the second chapter (*Politics of Memory and Photography*) after the introduction to the relationship between photography and the politics of memory that follows the chronology of Struth's academic years, which also appears relevant in the light of the oeuvres of his teachers – *Gerhard Richter*, and *Bernd and Hilla Becher*. Their work expresses critical views on issues of the politics of memory. I am analyzing the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher following the changes in the reception of their Archive, with a related assessment of their effect on their students, among them Struth. We gain insight to the studio of Gerhard Richter through his Atlas (huge collection of private and media pictures) and its interpretations. Struth, namely, actively contributed to the preparation of the Atlas exhibition in 1976, sorting many photographs as a student in the class of Richter. The development of Struth's concept of art and the maturing of his creative process is not only attributable to Becher's documentarist (pseudo-scientific and intermedial) heritage, but also to the comparative-analytical method identified in Richter's interpretation of *photographical clichés* and his experience focusing on the authenticity of the amateur photograph.

In the next chapter (*Unconscious Places*) I trace the growing independence of Struth from his academic tutors through the city photographs taken at the end of the 1970s in New York. I outline trends in the discourse of art criticism at the end of the seventies to illustrate the artistic environment in which the artist's own voice evolved. Psychoanalysis – as the theoretical background applied to substantiate art criticism and photography theory – plays a key role in this period.

Psychoanalysis is also noteworthy in relation to empirical observations in the creative work of Struth: in 1982, he conducted research jointly with the psychoanalyst Ingo Hartmann. On a chronological basis, my narrative begins in 1978, from the scholarship in New York (P.S.1), through the research in therapeutic work combined with family photographs carried out in Düsseldorf (1982-1983). The chapter generally covers two topics. One concerns the language of criticism enriched by the terms of psychoanalysis focusing on photographic representations, while the other relates to the urban photographs of Struth, with a focus on those taken in New York: *Streets of New York City: Central Perspectives*, 1978.

Demand for the emancipation of the photographic art is expressed at the end of the seventies in processes involving the critique of artistic conventions and art institutions. In Struth's native land, North-Rhine Westphalia (the artistic center of West Germany at the time), this is articulated essentially through the mobilization of the old issue of "art and science" in relation to documentary-photography. In New York, however, where Struth was on a scholarship in 1978 for roughly a year, demand for the emancipation of the photographic representation is expressed as part of sharp institutional critique, combined with the reception of anti-authorial theories and the elaboration of the postmodern theory of the visual arts. Discourse relating to photography is heard as the dominant voice. We will see later on how the critics of the October circle (among others, *Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Thierry de Duve*) applied the model of psychoanalysis' topology (tension between the unconscious and conscious) and applied the conceptual framework of psychoanalysis.

The other subject of the chapter concerns the photographs of Struth taken at this time, in 1978, in New York. It was in the process of this work, quasi under the influence of the city, that Struth discovered the central perspective as the "prototype of non-subjective interest". The geometrical construction of the linear perspective is also the basis of photographic projection – the so called *conic projection*. By way of an emphatic use of it, the black-and-white, essentially documentarist city pictures of Struth create theatrical spaces that open up the picture-plane to the psychological layer of reception, in the direction of the beholder's psychic field. The central perspective as a means (also serving as the exhibition of the camera's operation) in his museum related work, in the positioning (centered or diagonal) of the large-format camera, the display of spatial arrangements also has a marked presence.

The film semiotics research (1971) of the bilingual (French-Hungarian) psychologist *Ferenc Mérij*, intermediating the lectures of Jacques Lacan, and the theoretical work of the cinematographer *Gábor Bódy* – applying the dynamic linguistic paradigm – are perhaps most

appropriate for illustrating the possibilities offered by psychology and semiotics for photography theory and the adaptation of camerawork in the documentarist methods. The film semiotics research of Mérei and Bódy was conducted parallel, and even preceded the publications of the October circle, serving as a critical point of reference to them. (Semiotics research in the 1970s had been given a green light in the socio-cultural environment of Central Eastern Europe.) The understanding and varied interpretation of the work of Struth is boosted by Bódy's description of the *situationist*, *analytical documentarist* method and Mérei's research, which opens up the psychological layer of film imagery. The final part of the chapter discusses Struth's research conducted in collaboration with Ingo Hartmann, which, in my opinion, is traceable in the documentarist museum work that incorporates viewers' interactive situations. The *situationist* and *escalatory* method of documentary filming is synchronous with the prevailing assumptions of photography theory. According to such assumptions, the character of the photograph is not exclusively attributable to the creator's intentions. Photography is not a creative act, but the process of the inseparable play of the photographed subject, the photographer and the camera – the photograph is the result of this interactive play.

In the chapter entitled *From Naples to the Louvre*, Naples plays the leading role in providing motivation for starting the museum work. The effects of the "porous city" – simultaneously fusing and experiencing the past and present, the sacral and the profane – are pulsing in the diversity of Struth's Museum Photography, the medial exchange displayed in the photographs, blending of old paintings and the emerging photographic picture in a performative way, that it is: the transitions between the old and **the** new pictures. I narrate the impact of the city (and the impact of the city's cultural history) within the framework of a narrative montage. The elements of the related chronology are the Naples related material of *Walter Benjamin* and *Asja Lacis* (1925), *Roberto Rossellini's* film "Journey to Italy" and its analysis by *Laura Mulvey*. In her relevant volume of studies, Mulvey also directs the attention of the spectator (and researcher) on the photographic segments of the feature film's documentary layer and the static frames within the context of Rossellini's film. She places emphasis on reception, specifically on its "pensive" mode. The pensive spectator strips the layers of image media; these are isolated from underneath one another – stills or static photographic images (film stills) detached from the narrative moving picture (*delayed cinema*). Finally I discuss the experiences of Struth in Naples (final element of the narrative montage), which can be defined both literally and metaphorically as a tangible relationship with the paintings and old pictures. In Naples, Struth was surprised by the vivid, lively reality of how painting restorers carried out their daily occupation and routine with old pictures. The fresh experience of a stay in Naples triggered a dramatic contrast in Struth's perception at a museum visit (Louvre), in the fossilized surroundings

and atmosphere of museums that had an air of necrophilia about them. The creative paths of Benjamin, Rossellini and Struth show similarities not only through the impression and even transformative effect of Naples in their work. Benjamin's spirit is very much present in Struth's work. It is expressed in the work of *Eugène Atget*, the documentarist producing surreal impressions (photographic accuracy driven to the extreme of unreality), which is very much relevant for both of them, and by their affinity for psychoanalysis. Above all, their belief in the inevitable photographic shift in art, as expressed by Benjamin in both *A Short History of Photography* (1931) and in his "Kunstwerk" essay (1936), which served as recurring points of reference in photography theory. The reconciliation of urban space and the human spirit, and mutual changes between them are expressed in the perspectives of all three artists. Rossellini's similarity to Struth, however, is not limited to this and to documentary inspired film-making, but is also shaped by his humanization of the technical-optical apparatus, the camera. Similarly to Rossellini, Struth applies photography not only to document, but also to *animate*, to preserve (restore) the transient with the new imaging technique, and to accomplish the feat of reviving things long past.

In the fifth and sixth chapters I analyze four of Struth's museum photographs in detail. The conceptual terms of Ferenc Mérei (*rhetoric figures, implied knowledge*) and Gábor Bódy (*double projection, layers of documentary and fiction in still*) are referenced in the picture analyses of both chapters: the conceptual framework of the psychologist, who is open to semiotics research and the cinematographer, who is well-versed in dynamic semiotics. Just as Mérei analyzed the psyche from a historical perspective, i.e. as grounded in change, Bódy, too, was committed to paradigmatic linguistics, which was open to time, change and historical perspectives. This is the reason why I consider their perspectives and intermediary ideation to be in tune with and appropriate for Struth's similarly historically motivated work, which evolves through the recognition of incessant change and applies a creative process that also reflects his concept of imagery.

In the fifth chapter I analyze the photographic tableau as a part of post-cinematic photography – a genre shaped by the language of film, but recapturing the still image over the motion picture, encoding pure movement (the flow of thought and passion, the accompanying affects) in the static image through intertextual play. It is within this context that I analyze the "Tokyo picture" (*Tokyo, National Museum of Art, 1999*). Concerning Anglo-American literature, I discuss the historical research of *David Campany* that provides an analysis of the relationship between cinema and photography. He places emphasis on two factors in connection with the appearance of autonomous photographic pictures in the end of 1970s: the disrupting effect of a huge number of film stills (standphotos, publicity pictures, archives of scene pictures and stills) released from film

studios, laying the path for the deconstruction of film narratives, and the constructive effect of Roland Barthes's "The Third Meaning", which also appeared in English translation.

In the final sixth chapter (entitled "*Pictures in a Picture: The Joy of the Picture*") I analyze three pictures: *Paris, Musée d'Orsay 1* 01.06. 1989, 182 x 147 cm, Cat. 4051, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, 04.06. 2000, Cat. 7691 and *Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum 1*, 01. 12. 1989, 234 x 179,5 cm, Cat. 4091. Based on the close analysis of the photographic pictures, the emphasis is on intertextual play and the psychological layer of the images. In relation to the above, I also examine the *picture-in-a-picture* format from the perspective of the history of painting and photography. Since neither narrative covers the effect and operating mechanism of the picture-in-a-picture format of the Museum Photographs, I introduced the term *play-effect* to expand the conceptual language.